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Interview with Shirley Nickerson Williams and George Nickerson

By Nathan Anthony

In Orleans, Massachusetts

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Q: This is an interview with Shirley Williams and George Nickerson on March 24, 1988 for the Oral History Project of the Eastham Historical Society. We are in Shirley's home on Skaket Road in Orleans and the interviewer is Nathan Anthony.

First of all, I'm curious about your forebears. Who was Sam Nickerson?

Shirley: Sam Nickerson was our grandfather, and his father was Sam Nickerson and his father was Sam Nickerson. There were three in a row. We're the eleventh generation of the Nickerson family in Eastham. The first William Nickerson came over from Norfolk, England about 1630. He founded the whole town of Chatham. He bought the whole town of Chatham from the Indians.

George: You mean he stole it.

Shirley: He didn't steal it. [Laughter]

Q: He actually bought it from the Indians?

George: He traded a couple of leaky rowboats for it.

Shirley: No. Anything the Indians never had before meant a lot to them. They gave them iron pots and iron spears. And bolts of cloth, which the Indians had never had. And to them that was as valuable as money. That's not stealing.

Q: And they were willing to barter, in effect, land for it?

Shirley: Yes. And so they traded the land. They had quite a lot of problems with the Plymouth government, because they were supposed to do it through the Plymouth Colony government, and it was quite a few years before it was official and approved. But it finally was, and he and his children settled, and then there was a lot of people-- I guess he had the land and sold it to the people who wanted to come there. A lot of them were his own children though and the girls' husbands too.

Q: Was there any particular reason why he picked Chatham? Was the soil better?

Shirley: Well, Eastham was all of Nauset, with Eastham down on

this end. And Yarmouth and Dennis were settled and Barnstable and Upper Cape were all settled. Harwich and Brewster were part of Nauset too at that time, and that was the only land that hadn't been settled. So he went into that.

My husband had the same-- this was eleven generations ago-- my husband had the same grandparents, the first two generations of William Nickerson. William the First and William the Second. We both have the same. And then the third generation, mine was Thomas Nickerson and his name stayed with William Nickerson. They stayed in Chatham, whereas Thomas came to Eastham, and the rest were all in Eastham, the other generation.

So there was Thomas and then there was William the Fourth. That's over fifth generation. Uriah was the sixth generation. Samuel the seventh generation. Samuel the eighth generation. Samuel the ninth generation. George, my father, the tenth, and I, Shirley ~~Emily~~<sup>Norma</sup>, the eleventh generation of Nickersons in Eastham.

Q: Which one was in the Civil War? The eighth, I guess.

Shirley: He was the eighth. Junior he was. And he married Ruth Lincoln. He was forty-five years old when he was in the Civil War, and he had three children. Why he went at that age, I don't know, unless-- times were kind of poor then. He may have gone for the money. Or during the Civil War, people that had money would buy a person to take their place, and whether he was bought to take somebody else's place, I'm not sure. He had served two

or three enlistments and they were about three months long. They weren't long enlistments. And then you could sign over. And he was home at Christmas and he went back from Christmas--

Q: What year was this?

Shirley: That was Christmas of 1864, and he went back and in January 8th of 1865 he was on picket duty in Petersburg, Virginia, and he was shot from behind and killed instantly.

My grandfather was only fifteen and he had two sisters younger than him.

Q: And your parents-- what were their names?

Shirley: Our parents were George Nickerson and my mother was Nellie Sanders. Her parents came right over from England and settled in Boston. They were married in England and all their children-- they had seven children-- and their children were all born here.

It's your turn to talk. [To George]

George: Hello. No, you're doing all right with this genealogy bit.

Q: What are your earliest memories?

George: My earliest memories? Well, the earliest one I have,



that always has bothered me all my life, is when they decided they were going to build up Massasoit Road. It was paved as far as Maurice Wiley's house and it was just dirt from there to the town line. So they came along and they spread cinders on the road, and I can remember how mad I was, because I couldn't walk barefoot on the road any more.

Q: You were just a child then?

George: Oh, yes. And that has stayed in my mind all these years, how sharp those cinders were. Because we didn't wear shoes in the summertime, of course, back in those days. You were lucky to wear them in the wintertime.

Q: What do you remember about school?

George: I can't think of anything in particular right now, but maybe-- go ahead.

Shirley: Well, what I remember, I guess, mostly about school was my mother was sick and had to have a gall bladder operation. Her father had had a gall bladder operation in 1927 and he died, and she had to have a gall bladder operation and of course, you know, because her father died, she didn't know whether she would live or not. So I being the only girl in the family, she didn't want to leave me home, so I was sent to my aunt's up in Weymouth. And so I spent a year up in Weymouth, mostly the second grade. That

I remember.

Q: What did your father do for a living?

Shirley: Well, he started out as a farmer.

George: And fisherman.

Shirley: And fisherman.

George: He had his own boat, and they bull-raked out in the Bay. They have a rake with a long pole on it.

Q: For shellfish?

George: Yes. Quahogs. In fact, he was out there one day and her son-in-law's grandfather died on his boat and my father's the one that brought him ashore. He had a heart attack and died on his boat and my father brought him ashore. And now we're related. [Laughs]

Shirley: I think all old regional Eastham is related to one another, because of all the different mothers. You know, with the mothers you get all the different names. For instance, my grandfather-- his wife was Ruth Lincoln. Ruth Lincoln is in that picture up on the wall and that clock belonged to her. That's why I have the statue of Lincoln, because--

Q: She was related to Abraham Lincoln?

Shirley: Well, the first Lincolns that came over that settled in Eastham-- one did-- they left, but then came back again to Harwich, and so they more or less were here. I know that Abraham was related to the Lincolns in Massachusetts. Most of the Lincolns settled in Hingham, Mass., but there were some that came down here too. We always figured there was some relation there. We haven't figured that out genealogically yet.

Q: Did any of that family settle in Lincoln, near Concord?  
Lincoln, Mass.

Shirley: I don't know.

George: That would be interesting, where they got the name. Was the name before or after Abraham Lincoln?

Q: I don't really know, have any idea. My brother lives in Concord.

Shirley: Well, Abraham in his ancestors has Sparrows too, and the Sparrows, of course, are here on the Cape too. They weren't very good about writing things down in those days and they haven't got any definite proof on Abraham Lincoln, just where his family originated from that day. They haven't got any definite

proof. A lot of people that are into genealogy like to believe this and that, but that isn't definite proof.

Q: I see. But there are strong indications?

Shirley: There are strong indications.

George: I can remember the play part of school. In the winter-time we had that Model T bus, the barge. It actually didn't look much different than the horsedrawn one, except it had a little four-cylinder motor in front of it, and it went about the same speed. So we'd go to school in the morning, there would be, oh, eight or ten sleds being dragged behind the school bus. All the way to school and then at recess we'd go across the street and slide down the hill.

Shirley: There was a nice big hill there, across from the National Park.

George: Until they filled half of it in.

Shirley: Right. But there was a nice big hill there. And then in the summertime-- I mean early spring, before we got out of school-- we could go to the Salt Pond and swim. We never were allowed at the Minister's Pond behind it, because that was deep. It was right behind the school there, but it was deep and dangerous and our lives were threatened if we ever went near that

pond.

Q: You couldn't fish there even? Or could you?

Shirley: We weren't allowed to from school.

George: Oh, no, not from school. We used to go fishing there, but there was nothing there but a few little perch. That's all there was. Nothing there big enough to eat.

Q: Does it seem to you there was more snow in those days? I mean, you talk about dragging the sleds.

George: Oh, yeah, definitely.

Q: Were the winters colder?

George: Yes, you would have snow just about all winter.

Q: And how was the school heated? Was it warm?

George: Coal stove in the corner of the room. Had one coal stove in each room. They had one out in the-- you had a room where they used to feed us hot soup for lunch. They had a stove out there. And the outhouse was attached to that.

Q: The school was on Minister's Pond? Is that where you went?

George: No, the one where the existing school is. But there were three buildings like that. In a T. I never can remember whether you had three grades in the first building. Somewhere along the line one of those buildings only had two grades in it, but I don't remember which one it was.

Shirley: First and second.

George: Oh, just first and second. So in between, that triangle, they filled that in and that was a room and that was where we used to have our lunch. Depression days, why, they had hot soup for us at lunch time.

Q: Do you remember much else about the Depression?

George: It didn't make any impression on us, because we grew up with it.

Shirley: We ate a lot of quahogs and ate a lot of chowder and ate a lot of turnips. My mother did-- of course, everybody did in those days, was the canning. In the summertime we'd have a big house garden, like, you know, with everything in it. Tomatoes-- and then we had a lot of apple trees. Oh, that was one thing that I can remember from my childhood. We had a lot of apple trees and we had a big bin down in our basement there and we'd fill it up.

George: A couple of barrels.

Shirley: Oh, barrels?

George: Yes. We'd have about two barrels of apples to last all winter. Baldwins, which were good hard apples. I remember my father, every night he'd go down and get a bowl of apples and sit there and listen to his two-tube radio and peel apples and eat them.

Shirley: He had the earphones on. We had two sets of earphones. My father had one and my mother had one, and if we wanted to hear, she'd turn one of the earphones out there and we'd have to take turns listening with her out of one earphone. That was our first radio.

George: But other than that, you know, a couple of cents a week for spending money. For buying candy up to Sam Brackett's store. But, of course, for a couple of cents you got a pretty good handful of candy.

Q: Where was Sam Brackett's store?

George: Where the present Thrift Shop is.

Q: In the same building?

George: Same building. Except it was a lot bigger. That was quite a building, because they had an elevator in it, a hand-operated elevator.

Shirley: It had everything, from clothing to groceries. They had grain for the horses and hay and--

George: Kerosene.

Q: Is this the Thrift Shop on Oak and Massasoit?

Shirley: Yes. On the corner of Oak and Massasoit.

George: Right. Oh yes, we know a lot about that.

Shirley: Yes, that was very interesting.

George: They had a guy, George Wiley. He used to come down and he'd start at the store and he'd go to the Wellfleet line and that would take him all day to take the orders. That would be one day of the week. He was the local newspaper. He knew everyone that was pregnant, those who were fighting, those who were drinking, everything else. He knew everything. And then later on in the week he would deliver the orders and that took another day, just to go that-- what, half a mile maybe?



Q: He could report on what he'd learned the first time around.

George: Yes. Right. But there were, you know, only about ten or twelve houses on the road. That was funny.

Shirley: They also would deliver the bread early in the morning, and quite often, when we were getting ready to go to school, we'd be out of bread. So Mother would send one of us down to the store to get some. The store wouldn't be open, but the bread man just left the box on the doorstep. And the bread was ten cents. So we'd take a loaf of bread and leave our dime there, and when he came, he'd have the dime.

Q: The honor system?

Shirley: The honor system, right. People didn't think about stealing in those days. At least as far as I know, they never did.

George: There was very little of it. You didn't worry about leaving something out at night.

Shirley: Too many of us were related to Lincolns. [Laughter]  
Honest Abe!

Q: Do you remember people coming down here in the summertime in those days? Were there visitors?

Shirley: Yes, but there were very few. There were maybe two or three cottages when we were real young.

George: Well, Brackett had quite a few cottages on Campground Road and Campground Beach. In fact, some of them are still there. And then we had what was Silver Spring Beach, so we had cottages there.

Shirley: There was only about one at Silver Spring.

George: Well, up on top of the hill there were maybe three or four. Then there were two or three down on what is Cook's Brook Road, which some idiot changed to Steele Road. It runs along the bed of the creek, but they decided that it should be called Steele Road instead of Cook's Brook Road at Town Meeting one year, because some guy didn't like the idea of a straight line being two different names. The road's a straight line.

Shirley: Steele Road wasn't even there when we were little.

George: No, Steele Road never even existed back then. Up until after the year.

Q: Did they change the name back again to Cook's Brook Road?

George: No. Cook's Brook Road is opposite the church [Catholic

Church of the Visitation on Massasoit], and then when it hits Higgins Road, that's the end of Cook's Brook Road. But Steele Road is down where Cook's Brook was. I mean, that's where the brook was. The former Pierce house on Aspinet Road-- the man that owned it, Mr. Pierce, told me that that was floated up there on barges. Came from Billingsgate.

Q: Where's Billingsgate?

George: Billingsgate Island.

Shirley: It was an island that was out in Cape Cod Bay that has disappeared.

George: At real low tide, you can just see a little bit of it, that's all.

Shirley: It was a big island. It had a church and school and a lot of people's houses out there.

Q: What happened? It just sank beneath the waves?

Shirley: No, the waves just washed it away.

George: It had a lighthouse on it.

Shirley: Yes, a lighthouse was on it.

George: Some of the rocks are still there from the base of the lighthouse, I guess.

Q: Is that near where the old Longstreet--

George: Well, no, no. It's just south of-- what is it? Beach Point in Wellfleet?

Shirley: I think so.

George: You know the point that makes out in Wellfleet? You go down on Chequasset Neck. Well, it's just south of the end of that point. They used to go across in a horse and wagon between there. That was how they could get to it, other than boat.

Q: You did say you had some memories about Prohibition?

George: Yeah! [Laughs]

Shirley: I remember that we found an awful lot of hiding places around our house. During Prohibition the fishing boats would be carrying the liquor and the Coast Guard would be after them. And so they'd come into the Bay and they'd dump all their load and take off, so they wouldn't get caught. And this particular time they came into the Bay right off of Eastham Beach.

George: South Sunken Meadow.

Shirley: And they dumped their big load. Well, the whole town found out about it the next day. Our father at that point was working for the mosquito control, the Cape Cod mosquito control, and he had a truck with big tires on it. So all he had to do was drive right out to pick up this stuff.

George: Wait a minute now. Get your story straight. He didn't dare use his truck. He lugged every case ashore on his back.

Shirley: Oh, he did?

George: Yeah.

Shirley: I didn't remember that.

George: Because the truck didn't belong to him, so he didn't dare use it. But he lugged an awful lot of cases. But not being-- well, not being up in the world, he saw this name "Champagne", so he figured, boy, this stuff is valuable. He couldn't even give it away. He left cognac sitting there. He brought one bottle of cognac and he brought some cases of whiskey, because he knew what whiskey was worth. My brother used to trade a quart of champagne for five gallons of gasoline.

Q: So it worked out profitably?

George: Oh, yes. Yes, it helped carry us through one winter.

Shirley: But after he got it home, he didn't know what to do with it, and he didn't want to get caught, so we were hiding it everywhere. I remember putting some way up in an attic that was up in like the third story, way behind a chimney, and in our basement. And then our barn had a fruit cellar or something out there.

George: There was a basement out there, yes.

Shirley: Then we had a well out there too. It was a regular brick well. That's the only way we got water when we were little, was through this well, that you pulled the water up with a bucket. And it was out in what we called the cook-house, which was a summer kitchen away from the house. He lowered some by rope down in that well.

Well, the next year we got water in the house and we got a bathroom and we got the house painted and we got a washing machine for my mother.

George: And we got a Model-A Ford. We got rid of our Model-T and got our first Model-A.

Q: What year was that?

Shirley: '31 or '32.

George: I don't know. It was a '29 Model-A that he had, but I don't remember what year he got it.

Shirley: Around '32, like that.

George: Not only that, but he got a boat, a rum-running boat. Came ashore at Campground and he laid claim to it and he ended up with it. Nobody dared claim it.

Q: So what did he do with it?

George: He used it for fishing until he finally sold it. But it was a well-built boat, a nice boat. It was fairly new, but nobody-- some guy kind of made a claim to it and came down and gave him a hundred dollars and took the cabin-- my father had removed the cabin, getting ready to make a fishing boat out of it. They took the cabin back to Boston and that's the last we ever heard of him.

Q: When did you get out of school? Were you in the same class?

Shirley: No.

George: No, I was two years ahead of her. I had my fiftieth anniversary at Donald Sparrow's this past summer.

Shirley: Donald Sparrow started in my grade, but he got two double promotions over the years, so he ended up in my brother's class, two years ahead of me.

Q: What did you do when you left school?

George: Picked cranberries. Anything that you could make any money at.

Shirley: That was still hard times.

George: I remember picking cranberries back when I was still allergic to poison ivy. I'd just be covered with it until the cranberry season went by.

Q: You must have been pretty miserable.

George: Because you were down on your hands and knees, you know, picking cranberries with a cranberry scoop. They didn't do it with a machine in those days. And you still helped your parents raise turnips. The asparagus had gone by by that time. There was no more asparagus, but you still raised turnips.

Shirley: The turnips though-- the last year my father planted turnips, the truck used to come around and take them to a market in Boston and then they would pay you what the going price was.



For the last load that he sent, he got a bill back for the freight. They didn't pay anything for his turnips. So that was the end of his turnips.

So now Arthur [their brother] has started back up on the turnips again and renewing the old custom.

But then my father went into the mosquito control company here. He started that in the twenties. He was foreman. He only worked nine months a year though, and he stopped in about the middle of December and didn't start again until the middle of March. So we had very poor winters all the time when we were growing up, because there was no money. And they didn't have unemployment money, and the men in working for the state, you didn't get any kind of a pension or anything.

George: It wasn't just for the state. It was a combination of town, county and state, so that eliminated any pension or any unemployment or anything like that, because all three were involved. So nobody did anything.

Q: That must have been tough.

George: Yeah. Well, you ate more quahogs, that's all.

Shirley: And my mother had to do more canning in the summertime to keep us all through the winter. And I remember too, when we'd go shopping, she'd buy in the summertime extra, like cans of milk and cans of cocoa and different things like that, that we

had to have for canned goods, she'd buy. And we had a big box upstairs in the attic there and we'd keep some of these over the summer, so when it came those three months, we had something to eat.

George: Then in the early part of the winter, why, we usually raised a pig, and my father used to sell some of the salt pork to the First National Store, because he knew the manager. The manager was good about that. He was a Quinn, the father of Howard Quinn.

Shirley: And Bill Quinn.

George: He used to help the people as much as he could.

Shirley: Work was very scarce though. My father did get some carpentry jobs and different odd jobs during the winter to get a little extra money, but there wasn't all that much work around, especially in the wintertime.

George: Not until Roosevelt got in and came up with a PWA and WPA, whatever.

Q: Do you remember that having an effect down here?

George: Oh, yes. Yes.

Shirley: Oh, yes, indeed.

George: You didn't make much. I mean, ten, twelve dollars a week is what your pay was, but that's better than nothing.

Q: Where were the projects?

George: Father-- I remember him working cutting out old wood roads, so that in case of fire the trucks could get in there and stuff like that. My brother was old enough then, he had a car and he worked on the Bass River bridge. The present one, you know, on Route 28? And he drove back and forth every day and got fifteen dollars a week. This was in the middle of the winter.

Q: That was pretty good money in those days here, I guess.

George: Well, yes. Because gasoline was cheap. A lot cheaper than it is today.

Shirley: Also they had bought a store from Clayton Horton, that tea room that we were talking about, and Mother ran that in the summertime and made a little money. But it was just a summer store there. And then several times they rented it in the wintertime, like for a house sort of for people to live in. But mostly the people she rented it to didn't have very much money and she didn't get paid. But then finally, later on, then she started putting groceries in along with the tea room and turned

it into a grocery store. So she had that right up until war-times, when we all left home and it got to be too much for her. Rationing was terrible, the coupons and everything, and people would come in and try to get food without the coupons-- the sugar and coffee-- and it got to be too much for her~~self~~, so she stopped it then.

So then we made that into a house and rented our old house. That worked out.

Q: Where was that?

Shirley: The store was next to Nickerson's garage, but when Arthur wanted to add onto the garage, he moved that onto Oak Road and that's now Roger's Barber Shop. That was the building that was our store, grocery store.

We were lucky. We always had candy when we were kids, and ice cream. [Laughs]

Q: When you wanted to buy clothing, or when your parents wanted to buy clothing, where did they go?

Shirley: Sears and Roebuck.

Q: Which was where?

Shirley: Oh, the mail order.

Q: Oh, the catalogue. Oh, I see. You didn't have to go to a--

Shirley: No. Well, Hyannis if you had money.

George: We used to go shopping in New Bedford.

Shirley: Yes. Yes, we did.

George: That's what we did, because that was the nearest shopping center. In the fall, before school started, we always made a trip to New Bedford to get our clothes and things we needed for school, because it was a lot cheaper than around here. I don't know, I don't even know how to get to New Bedford any more.

Q: Yes, it's hard. There's always a new road all the time. You can get lost.

George: Yes, you get on 195, something like that, and you can go right by most any city and not even know you're there.

Q: That's true. Do you remember any shipwrecks or anything like that?

George: Yes, but they're too numerous to even remember the names of any of them. I remember the Lut~~z~~on, which was the one that had the blueberries. That was about-- probably '38 or '39, I

don't remember which year it was. That came ashore. Guys went down there and made a little money unloading blueberries.

Q: Where did it come ashore?

George: Oh, three or four miles south of Nauset Beach here in Orleans.

Q: Not near where the Eldia--

George: No, way beyond that. Way beyond that. And I drove down in my car. A lot of them drove in a car. We thought-- big deal! I put oversized tires on my car. I put five fifty nineteens on. That was considered oversized tires, so we just took it down on the beach. Nobody to tell us any different. They were big for us. The truck my father had for the mosquito control, he had regular nine hundred tires on that, and that would go anywhere. But when you had the five fifties, you used to carry a gang of kids with you, so that they could push you up over the risings.

Q: They enjoyed the ride and they could be put to use?

George: Right.

Q: Do you remember how you celebrated holidays during the wintertime, when times were tough? Like Christmas and Thanksgiving? Did you have much of a holiday?

George: Oh, yes. Yeah. Shirley had that on her list here. So I'll wait till she gets back. {Shirley is talking on telephone} She can talk about that. She's got a lot of things she's talking about.

Miss Keith was our teacher in the first and second grade, and she used to have what we called a rhythm band. Triangles and blocks of wood and sticks and stuff like that, and we all had a little orchestra. We didn't make much music, but it was to teach you rhythm more than it was to teach you music.

{Shirley returns} He was just asking about holidays.

Shirley: Oh, yes. Did you tell him about Valentine's Day?

George: No. It's on your list.

Shirley: On Valentine's and Washington's Birthday we used to have a big party. Everybody in the school brought Valentines. They drew names, so that every child got Valentines. You just didn't give them to your friends, you drew names, and you took a Valentine for that child.

Then we'd have a big party and everyone in the school brought some ingredients. Or else they'd make cookies or cakes or something. But they'd bring ingredients for homemade ice cream, and they'd have the ice cream freezers, the big gallon ones, there, and made, I guess, probably six or so.

George: At least a couple of gallons anyway.

Shirley: Yes. And so the whole school would have homemade ice cream and cookies. That was delicious.

George: It was quite a treat to have the cherries too, because we always had cherry ice cream.

Q: That must have been something everybody looked forward to.

Shirley: Yes. Right.

George: Of course, that too-- you had more than one grade in a room. Like you had six, seven and eight in one room. So the sixth grade students heard the lessons that the eighth graders got, and I think it helped you.

Shirley: If you missed something in the sixth grade, you could hear it in the seventh and eighth and you could get it. And then, of course, if you were in the-- that's how Donald [Sparrow] got double promotions, because in the sixth grade he'd hear the seventh and eighth grade lessons. And he had a good memory. So he could skip a grade that way, without losing out. And in the third, fourth and fifth, he did the same in those grades too.

Q: Were the teachers the same teachers? Did they stay her@year after year?



George: Oh, yes.

Shirley: We had the same ones all through.

George: The same teachers were there all the time that I was there. Virginia Horton. She was a Nickerson.

Shirley: Clayton's wife.

George: She was a Nickerson. Miss Keith, she never married. She lived up until her nineties down in Florida. My brother used to keep in touch with her all the time. And then Otto, another Nickerson.

Shirley: When I was in third or fourth grade, we had Mr. Nassi, who was the musical instrument teacher, and he came to the Cape. He was from Albania and he was an interesting person just to hear him talk, but he believed that every child should learn some kind of music, that it was so good for you. And he had all the schools, from Harwich, Chatham, Brewster, Orleans, Eastham, Wellfleet, Truro and Provincetown that he taught, and he'd go certain days to each school. And everybody tried to get an instrument and tried to play. They had a regular band. They had an orchestra and a band.

Q: I'll bet the children liked that too.

Shirley: Yes.

George: Well, they used to have a big concert once a year at what was called the Exchange Hall in Harwich, which was the biggest building around at that time.

Shirley: Right. Since torn down.

George: Yes, since torn down. Lessons, I remember, were twenty-five cents a week.

Shirley: My two brothers were accomplished. George had the violin and Arthur the saxophone. But I sat with my father and did nothing.

George: My violin came from Sears Roebuck for nine dollars, complete with an extra set of strings and a case and music lessons. For nine dollars. And it still works.

Q: Do you ever play it?

George: No. No, there's no strings left on the violin or the bow, either one.

Shirley: My mother was a piano player. She never took lessons herself, but her two older sisters did, and so she learned from

them. I still have her piano, because she loved it so much, I couldn't part with it. And it's still in there. Because she was born and raised in Boston, and when she married and came to Eastham, it was the end of the world. No stores or streetcars or anything at all. She was so homesick and lonesome lots of times that she said she'd just go in and play the piano, and while she was playing the piano, why, she'd start feeling better again. And then when the boys got older, up in high school, she got an orchestra together. My two brothers and our second cousin.

George: And Albert Nassi, he played with us.

Shirley: Albert Nassi was the teacher's son. And Wesley Moore was on drums. He's our second <sup>cousin</sup> ~~son~~. And Ralph Saunders was another violinist.

George: Yes, he played violin.

Shirley: And she got the orchestra together and they used to play after basketball games. We'd have basketball games and then have dances afterwards on Friday nights.

George: We'd get ten dollars for playing for a couple of hours.

Shirley: And then they played in some of the restaurants around too, for dancing after eating. They had a great time.

George: Albert Nassi played before the King of Albania as a child. He was a fabulous violinist, but he was killed in World War II in the Air Force. His plane was shot down. Of course, Donald Sparrow's brother was killed as a pilot in World War II.

It's funny, but World War II sort of broke up everything down here. Never the same afterwards. The kids all went in the service, you know, and moved away for a few years while they were in the service. And when you get back, why-- I always think of the kids that I played with all the time, up until I went into the service. And then I never saw that much of them afterwards, you know. They got married and stuff like that and you just sort of separated then. But as kids we were always very close with each other. Never had arguments. I remember Louie Benner, Red Lee and I used to go out with our slingshots and we'd be gone all day long. If we got hungry at noon-time we went and raided somebody's turnip field, peeled a turnip and ate it raw. Stayed out. Kept right on going. You walked everywhere. None of us could afford bicycles at that time.

Q: Do you remember much about town meetings in those days? When you were a little bit older, I mean.

Shirley: When we were in school and in the eighth grade, they had town meetings during the day, because most everybody was farmers back in the olden days there. And my father could take time off to go to town meeting during the daytime. Of course, you didn't get around at night-time in those days. Weren't any

electric lights. So the meetings were in the day-time, so the eighth grade kids would walk down to the Town Hall and listen to what was going on. We found it-- I remember finding it very interesting.

George: You had the same problem then that you had today. You had just a few with control of town meeting. They would out-talk everybody else, you know. It's the same thing today.

Q: Speaking about no electricity at night, which was one of the reasons you had it in the day-time, when did you get electricity? How old were you when you got it?

Shirley: I think I was about eight.

George: I thought it was later, but I don't really remember.

Shirley: I know when we had it in our house, Arthur was old enough that he helped the electrician. Of course, the old houses, they had to drill holes in the floors and in the walls to get the wires through, and he worked helping the electrician. So he must have been fourteen or fifteen. And he's seven years older than I. So I must have been about eight. You must have been about ten.

Q: That would make it about-- ?

George: 1930, somewhere in there. The early thirties anyway.

Q: You had kerosene lamps?

Shirley: Right.

George: Yes. Then for reading we had an Aladdin light, which was the kind with the wick that hung down, and that gave a real bright light and that was what we used when we studied. We used that light so we wouldn't go blind. Because kerosene light doesn't give you much light for reading.

Q: Of course this is a little bit after World War II, but when the National Seashore came, what was your feeling about that?

Shirley: It didn't bother me quite so much, because I was married and lived here in Orleans. But I thought it was a good idea.

George: I surveyed the entire-- worked as a surveyor, and I surveyed the entire boundaries of the National Seashore, which was quite a few footsteps, when you figure you've got to walk it all. I don't know, I was a little disgusted, because of some of the politics you could see was involved in it. People being favored over other people.

Q: In what way? That they could keep more land or something?

George: Well, no. I can remember one place in particular, where the line where they were taking the property followed so many feet off of a town road in Truro, and then it got to this property and it suddenly made a big jog and went all the way around this guy's property and didn't take anything from him. And then it continued on its way the way the rest of it was. You knew politics were involved, like everything else, you know.

TAPE ONE, SIDE TWO

Shirley: I might tell you about state children. People in those days when money was kind of scarce used to take state children. Not that they made any money on it. I think they got three dollars a week for them. But if they took a black child, they got five dollars a week. So that there was one person in town that did bring some black children, and I think I was about fourth grade the first time I ever saw a black child. There just weren't any around. I thought she was just as nice as everybody else.

Q: Where did the state children come from actually?

Shirley: Boston.

George: Well, there were several places in town, houses that had at various times-- one kid that I grew up with and went all through school with was a state child, a boy.

Shirley: My sister-in-law had a state child. She got him at three years old and he stayed with them and he was just like a brother to my husband.

Q: Do you ever keep in touch?

Shirley: He's right here in Harwich and we'<sup>re</sup>~~ll~~ really friendly with the whole family. It was a nice thing to do.

George: Yes, there were several families in town that had them.

Q: You would get some money from the state, would you?

Shirley: Yes. They provided their clothes, all their clothes, and my sister-in-law got three dollars a week for food for them.

George: [Laughs] Can you imagine three dollars a week for food?

Shirley: But you didn't get any pay really. It was just something that people would like to do.

Q: What do they do nowadays? Do they have that sort of system now?



Shirley: They still do.

George: Yes, you have-- oh, what do they call it now? Because they're always in trouble. They put them into these families where the kids get beat up. You know, it's involved in the welfare system. But they still have that program.

Q: What about doctors? Did you have any trouble getting hold of a doctor in those days?

Shirley: We had a doctor in Wellfleet and we had one in Orleans. Dr. Bell was down in Wellfleet there and he had old Model-T cars. In fact, his son collects Model-T cars now. He's got the first one his father ever had.

George: He's in the Model-A business, but he may have a Model-T too. But when we were being born, why, our folks went to Boston. We were born in Boston.

Shirley: So we're not really Cape Codders. We were born in Boston Hospital, because my grandmother lived there.

George: It was safer, you know.

Shirley: Yes, it was. Cape Cod Hospital--

George: We had no hospital when we were born.

Shirley: It started in a house in 1919. It was just a house up there. Very small.

Q: When did you say it started?

Shirley: In 1919.

George: But that's twenty-five or thirty miles away and with a Model-T Ford, you mother could give birth to several children before you got there.

Shirley: My mother was lucky that her mother was in Boston, that she could go and stay with her when we were born.

Q: Did they have midwives?

Shirley: They did.

George: Yes. I imagine most children were born at home in those days. They had to be.

Shirley: Winnie Knowles, the old Police Chief there from Eastham, his mother had a house down next to the ancient cemetery down there, and she was a midwife and she used to take labor cases right into her home. You had to stay in bed two weeks

after your child was born then. When my first one was born, I had to stay in bed ten days in the hospital in Hyannis. The second one I think I stayed eight days and the last one five. So they changed. Now my daughter, the baby was born at midnight Friday and she was home Sunday. A day and a half. Her doctor lived right down the street from her though.

George: Things have changed, because we were talking about the gall bladder my mother had, and I don't know how long she was in the hospital, but just recently I knew a woman that went in and had her gall bladder out and was out-- two days later she was home. So things have certainly changed medical-wise.

Shirley: We had Dr. White in Orleans. He was very nice, and when I was fifteen years old I contacted polio. I babysat in the summertime-- this was Dr. Oliver Austin that owned what is now the Bird Sanctuary in Wellfleet, and it was a big summer home that he had there. And I babysat down there, because his grandchildren were there for the summer. Of course, at that time they had a lot of polio in New York. So those children had been home for a while and then they came back, and that must have been where I contacted the germ. I didn't have it too seriously, but Dr. White tested me over and he thought that that was what I had and he contacted the doctors in Boston and they laughed at him and said no, but he was sure it was. And someone from Boston came down and tapped my spine and measured what the cells that were in there-- there were supposed to be four and there were

four hundred, which was proof that it was polio.

Dr. White was seven miles from where we lived to Orleans. He came three times a day for the first three days, to make sure I wasn't developing any breathing problems or anything like that. Then he went two times and then one time for the first week. He was wonderful. We got a bill for fifty dollars.

Mine was a single case and then two weeks later three other people contacted. One boy got it-- his mother had worked with me, and she didn't contract it, but she evidently picked up the germ and gave it to her son. And those were the only cases at that time. He was very serious. He had lung problems and his body is still quite crippled from it.

But the doctors were very good in those days.

Q: They would do house calls more readily than they do nowadays

Shirley: Yes.

George: But, I mean, you think how much we've changed medically since then, because my grandfather died from fluid in his lungs. He actually drowned in his own fluids, but nowadays, why, they give you a pill a day and that takes care of it. And I take the pill every day! Just for that reason. Most anybody with heart problems does. But they didn't know in those days and the patients just drowned. So I guess it's a better world, but I don't think it's a happier world than it was when we grew up.

Q: Probably not.

George: Of course we didn't realize the pressures that were on our parents, growing up in the Depression, trying to feed and clothe us. That didn't bother us at all. A few patches on our knees didn't bother us. My mother would sit there and sew up socks, darn the socks at night, so we could wear them the next day. But everybody else was in the same boat, so nobody was concerned about it.

Q: And life was enjoyable enough, so that you didn't feel that you were deprived?

George: Right. You could go out duck hunting and-- didn't do much deer hunting. I don't think anybody in our family did any deer hunting, but they went out after ducks and geese. My brother did especially. So you'd have those to eat occasionally if he was lucky. So we made it. But I imagine there was an awful strain on our parents that we never realized.

Shirley: I think it's what you expect out of life, whether you're happy or not. If you don't set your goals too high, you're happy. But if you set your goals too high and don't make it, why then you're not very happy. And nobody on Cape Cod ever set very high goals, because they didn't expect to make very high goals. So we were happy without--

George: We couldn't make plans on college or anything like that. Out of our class, my high school class, there was only two or three kids that went on to college that I know of.

Q: How many were in your class?

George: Twenty-two, I believe.

Shirley: That's your high school.

George: Yeah, high school class.

Shirley: Grammar school I had eleven in my class.

George: I don't think mine was that much even.

Shirley: Well, but when you think of three classes in a room. My class was eleven and I think the class below me had fourteen, and the sixth grade probably had about ten. So that adds up to thirty-five, thirty-six kids. That was quite a lot of children. They'd have horrors if they had to teach that many children nowadays. [Clock chiming in background]

That clock that just was chiming there belonged to my great-grandmother. My grandfather-- he lived in an old Cape Cod house down on Massasoit Road, just before you get to the Wellfleet line, and the clock was still in the house after my great-grandmother died. And he had a step-brother, because, of course

his father was killed in the Civil War there and his mother married again and he had a step-brother and the step-brother was married.

In those days the telephones were all on one big line, and you used to ring once for one house and ring twice for another house and three and four-- so when somebody called you, the other people on the line could also pick up the phone and hear what was going on. So we'd be talking and every once in a while we would hear this clock chiming in the background. That was the clock that used to chime, because my step-uncle's wife used to like to listen on the phone.

Q: Well, I think we're through pretty much, unless you have something further you'd like to talk about.

Shirley: Right off the bat I can't think.

George: She's got a few notes here about reference to Otto Nickerson and some of his punishment he used to mete out at school.

Q: Let's hear that.

Shirley: He was a very good teacher and we loved him dearly, he did have good punishment. I think people had respect for him.

George: I lost respect for him when I saw him take an eighth

grade girl and bend her over the desk and give her a spanking in front of the class. And she happened to be a state child. If she had a parent, I don't think he would have done it. Because I remember him giving Bob Smith-- taking the strap to him one day for doing something. Then the next day Otto showed up with a black eye and a very bruised-up face, because he had tangled with the boy's father that night.

Then I also remember Bob Sparrow's brother. He misbehaved. Nothing serious, you know, but he misbehaved and he had to get the strap on his hand. Well, Otto brought down the strap and Wilbur pulled his hand back and the strap came down and hit Otto on the leg. Needless to say, Wilbur got quite a few more lashes after that, more than he originally planned on.

Oh, I don't know, there were a lot of things about school that weren't so pleasant in those days.

Shirley: We used to have May Basket parties. During the whole month of May we used to seem to plan a different May Basket part for each day of the month. Not quite, but several a week anyway. And we usually started out the first day of May at the teacher's house. And we'd take like a shoebox and get crepe paper and decorate them all up pretty, and all the kids would get a nickel or a dime, and you could get a lot of candy for a nickel or a dime then, and all the kids would fill the basket up full of candy. And we would go knock on the door, you know, and somebody had to come out and catch you. Well, when you got caught, you went and caught everybody else. That was the fun part. And the



everybody went in the house, and we played games. Post-office and Spin the Bottle, all those kinds of games. And eat the candy. We had quite a sociable time.

George: We always did the teachers, yes. And the most popular girls. You know. Not the boys. The most popular girls usually had-- we called it handing the May Basket. Where that came from, I don't know. But we spent a lot of time making that basket. Decorating it up.

So that's some of the things we did in the old days.

Shirley: We used to do a lot of sliding and ice-skating too. Of course you had to wait for the ponds to freeze up, but we had some nice hills to go sliding on too. I remember that I wanted a new sled real bad. So I wanted it for Christmas, and my folks had sent to Sears and Roebuck and got a sled for me. Of course I didn't know about it, but there was a nice big snowstorm just a few days before Christmas, so they dragged it out and gave it to me. Then my brother wanted to borrow it and he went down the hill on it and ran into a tree and broke the end off of it, the steering mechanism. A brand-new sled and I only had one handle to steer it with. But brothers are like that. [Laughter]

George: It's funny I don't remember that. I don't remember now. And our most popular pond is the one they're having the big stink about now. So-called Baker's Pond. We didn't call it Baker's Pond, the one that they just mangled the trees on. We called

that Brackett's Pond, because that was on Raymond Brackett's land. Or George Brackett's land. Baker's Pond was opposite the back end of Lil Baker's house, and that's the only reason they got those names, because somebody owned the property on them.

Q: That was the most popular pond?

George: Yeah, because they were very shallow. The water was-- if you fell in, you only went in up to your waist. So they were good and safe.

Q: Your parents wouldn't worry so much?

George: No. No.

Shirley: And then we'd build a fire on the edge of the ice too, so that when we'd be skating, if you'd get cold, you could go and warm up by the fire. The older ones, you know, would get the fire started. Didn't have to worry about the fire getting away from you. You'd do it right on the edge of the ice, so that it wouldn't get into the bushes or anything. We did that all the way up until they built the ice rink here in Orleans. Years back actually.

George: Also there's how much we learned as kids back in those days, because if you wanted something done, you had to do it yourself. I know I ran around with Red Lee quite a bit. As we

got to be fifteen, sixteen years old, we all had Model-T cars. I bought my first Model-T, which would probably be worth twenty-five or thirty thousand dollars today. I bought it for six dollars. And Red Lee bought his from George Brackett. It had been sitting in his barn for ten or fifteen years. And we pumped up the tires, hooked up a horse to it and towed it over to Red's house. Took the carburetor off and cleaned the dirt out of it. Put some gasoline in it, hooked it up to the horse and towed it down the road and got it started.

Half the roads in Eastham were made by us kids, because we couldn't drive on the town roads, so we made our own. And they eventually ended up to being sub-division roads now, a lot of them. Especially down in the Shurtleff area, around the Bay, between Herring Brook Road-- which was not Herring Brook Road then-- but between Herring Brook Road and the Bay. A lot of those roads we made as kids.

Shirley: The back road to Orleans there-- what did they call it?

George: Well, we called that the  
~~and the~~ <sup>Farm To</sup> Market Road. I don't know why, but now it's Herring  
Brook.

Shirley: That was just dirt.

George: That was still just a dirt road up until after World War  
II.

Shirley: My husband, the first date I had with him was on his  
motorcycle, and we went on that road and the motorcycle just  
stayed right in the rut..

Q: Were you nervous?

Shirley: Yes, because there was a caterpillar crawling across  
his back and I didn't dare let go to take it off. [Laughter] I  
was fifteen years old. That was fifty years ago.

George: I remember Red and I were--

Shirley: About your car. Tell him about your car.

George: -- sixteen or so, and Maurice Wiley lived up the street. He had a Model-A and his timing gear went. For five bucks Red and I took his car all apart and put a new timing gear in it, put it back together for five bucks. That was a lot of money for us.

Q: And you had fun doing it?

George: Sure. Yes.

Shirley: Tell about your car down in the Bay when the tide had gone over it.

George: Oh, yeah. Finally-- I guess it was in '37 or '38 I bought a '31 Chevy roadster for seventy-five dollars. It had about twenty thousand miles on it. Worn out, of course, you know. And we used to take them down to the beach and drive out at low water. We'd go out on the beach and drive out there on the flats. It was hard out there.

I was driving one day and my car stopped. And there was no way I could get it going. I ended up and found out it was the fuel pump that went on it. If it had been a Model-A, it would have been all right, because that was gravity fed, but mine had a fuel pump. Mine was a Chevy. So I sat there all through till the next morning. We went down with a Model-A the next morning and towed it ashore. I pulled the plugs on it and drained all the salt water out of it that day and went to work. Came home that night and half an hour later I was driving around town in

it.

Shirley: And it was two tides, wasn't it?

George: Well, no, just one. Just one tide. Never found the seats. I had to go to the dump and get some more seats for it. If you wanted parts for a car in those days, you just went up to the dump and found what you needed.

Q: One question I wanted to ask you was, you were talking about the man who-- what was his name, who took orders from the-- ?

Shirley: George Wiley.

Q: George Wiley. He sort of was the equivalent of a newspaper. Did you ever see a newspaper? Were there any newspapers delivered around?

Shirley: The Boston Post.

George: That came in the mail.

Shirley: That was two cents. Two cents.

George: When I was in high school the Cape Cod Times started up. Then there was another one in Hyannis, but for the life of me I can't remember the name of it. It started out competing against

the Times. I guess the first one was the Standard-Times from New Bedford. And then they started this other one up in Hyannis to compete with it.

Q: But would they come in the mail or would they be delivered by boys?

George: Delivered by boys. The Times was, because this kid, Red Lee, that I ran around with, he used to be a paper boy. When it wasn't raining. Or when he didn't have something to play with, he was the paper boy. He wasn't too dependable, but he was the best friend I ever had in my life. We knew each other from kids right on up until I went in the service, and I don't think we ever once had an argument.

Q: Is he still living?

George: No, he died of cancer eight, ten years ago.

Q: Well, it's nice to have a friendship like that.

George: Yes. Then there's still one other kid, but he was several years younger than me, that I was quite close to, but not as close as I was to Red. Red was her age, so he was closer to me, you know.

Q: Well, I think that about wraps it up, I guess, unless you

have something else that you want to say.

George: No. We'll think of a hundred things after you leave.

Q: It's really been fun. I really enjoyed it a lot.

Shirley: It's fun reminiscing too.

Q: Thank you very much for being so patient and for helping out.

George: I was just going to tell you another pair that you might like to interview, if you can get the two of them together, because they're both about the same age. And that's Louis Benner and Dick Brewer.

[END OF INTERVIEW]